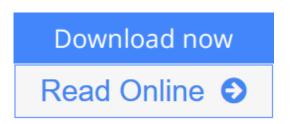


BUSINESS IN THE BEDROOM (Harlequin comics)

By Anne Oliver



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Abby stood in front of the battered house with a feeling of dread gnawing at her stomach. Despite the horoscope claiming today was a lucky day for a Pisces like her and the synergy of the name Capricorn House, she couldn''t shake her foreboding. She expected the owner to meet her, but no one was waiting. Overcoming her shyness, Abby approached the rugged workman on the building's grounds. His answer gave her quite a shock. Narrowing his blue eyes, the man informed her he was the owner and, worse, that he knew nothing about a new tenant. She'd been conned!

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Editorial Review

Excerpt. © Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved. According to her horoscope, this was Abigail Seymour's lucky day. And with a house named 'Capricorn,' she'd figured she couldn't go wrong.

Wrong.

She stared up at the run-down house from the base of the stairs, comparing it to the photograph in her hand. The weathered board on the veranda trim pronouncing that this was indeed 'Capricorn' hung at a dejected angle and swayed on rusted hinges in the sultry breeze.

In the photograph, the classic Queenslander home stood on stilts for air circulation, enclosed with open lattice-work. Wooden stairs led to a shady wrap-around veranda, which would catch the sea air and provide stunning views of the coastline. Tropical plants added a lush green aspect.

With several coats of paint, some time and energy— correction: a lot of time and energy— it could be that enchanting dwelling once again.

She'd be having a few choice words with the agent about false advertising.

Which reminded her—where was he? They'd arranged to meet here this morning. She checked the e-mail printout in her hand, then her watch. A bad feeling cranked up her spine. A very bad feeling. This Gold Coast house was supposed to have been the premises for her new business, Good Vibrations.

At the moment the only vibrations seemed to be coming from somewhere within. And they weren't good. They were the hammering-and-drill-and-not-ready kind. And since she hadn't organised any interior renovations yet... She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. *Think blue, Abby, and calm down.*

Right now it didn't help.

'What the heck's going on?' she muttered. She climbed the stairs, found the front door unlocked and pushed it open.

And stopped in the middle of what looked distressingly like a demolition site. Her fingers clenched around the lease. The signed and dated lease that stated this place was hers from tomorrow.

Wood shavings and lengths of wiring littered the floor. Strips of faded wallpaper hung from one wall above where a large mirror might have hung once upon a time. Dust motes swirled in a thin beam of sunlight and over a wide plank supported by stocky A-frame trestles and covered in tools.

Worse, the place smelled of new wood and old mould, so not the way a massage and aromatherapy centre should smell. Everything was brown and beige and grey.

The usually cheerful jingle of her anklet and beaded sandals sounded out of place on the bare floorboards as she crossed the room. 'Hello?'

No reply. Just the high-pitched whine of a drill.

Picking her way over assorted debris, she skirted the plank table and headed for a door at the back. In the next room a ladder was propped open in a corner near another trestle table. The tinny sound of a transistor radio drifted through the manhole above.

She'd have to settle for grilling the workman. She rapped on the wall. 'Excuse me...?'

The drill reverberated to life again, drowning her voice. Okay, forget the fact that she didn't like heights and that she was trying for a bit of professional decorum here. Setting her bag and papers on the floor, she slipped off her sandals and hitched one side of her skirt under her panty strap.

The loud curse that rolled through the hole was followed by the overhead thump of heavy footsteps. One very bare, well-muscled masculine calf stepped onto the ladder. Then another. Tanned and liberally covered with dark hair. The thighs were no less impressive, and went up and up...until they disappeared beneath brief—and loose-bottomed—denim shorts.

Oh... my. Abby swallowed as those legs descended, followed by one firm, taut backside. She glimpsed a thick ridge of scarring on the back of one thigh disappearing beneath his shorts, then more bare skin, more shifting muscle as his back and a pair of plaster-showered shoulders came into view.

She took an involuntary step back—onto her discarded shoes. The movement caught his attention and the hunk swivelled his head and looked down at her.

Piercing blue eyes met hers. The kind of eyes that looked straight through a woman's clothing and saw her naked. Except this man's eyes never left her face. Still, she had the sensation that he knew exactly what she was wearing right down to her red lace panties.

'Can I help you?' His whisky and sandpaper voice shimmied down Abby's spine like the slow sweep of an exfoliating glove.

She shifted her shoulders inside her T-shirt to ease the tingle. Wiggled her toes back into her sandals. Tugged at her hitched-up skirt and smoothed it down her thigh. She was here on business. He, on the other hand, with his impressive sweat-sheened body and bulging biceps, looked more into brawn than business. More like... a personal trainer?

Her pulse did a little bump. *Blue, blue, blue. Ice-blue. Sky-blue. Lake-blue...like his eyes. Oh, for heaven's sake, get on with it.* 'I'm looking for the owner of this...' She swept an encompassing hand over the clutter.

Lips that were full and sensual and wasted on a man stretched into a smile, creasing his cheeks in a way that made her want to trace the grooves with a finger.

'You found him,' he said, descending the ladder two rungs at a time.

'You?' Mr Tall, Dark and Delicious? She belatedly covered the crack in her voice with a throat-clearing as he approached. Amazing— even at five feet eleven she still had to look up. Early thirties, dark hair, chiselled cheekbones. His slightly off-centre nose was part of the charm.

She wasn't here to be charmed.

Shaking herself into business mode, she retrieved her papers from the floor, straightened her shoulders. 'Mr...'

'Zachary Forrester.' He offered a hand along with another one of those stunning smiles.

Like everything about him, his grip was firm...and tantalisingly brief. But not brief enough for her to miss the sensation of hard, calloused palm against hers. The sparkle of awareness that tingled up her arm.

'Abigail Seymour. Abby. Mr Forrester, I'm...' She trailed off, frowning down at the paper in her hand. Zachary Forrester *wasn't* the name on the lease. She fought a sudden spike of nausea as he grabbed a towel slung on the ladder, swiped it over his sweat-damp hair.

'If you're the insurance rep...' His brow creased as he glanced at her attire.

'Do I look like an insurance rep?' She blew out a breath. 'I'm your new tenant.' She tapped her thigh with the document that proclaimed that fact. 'What's the deal here, Mr Forrester? Because I'm confused.'

His cute dimples winked out and his gaze narrowed. 'That makes two of us. You sure you have the correct address?'

'It says so on that rusted excuse for a mailbox. "Capricorn."' Stepping forward, she shoved the document at his chest—his broad, hairy chest—and caught a whiff of honest-to-goodness male sweat and dust. 'I have a lease for business purposes, starting tomorrow.'

Still frowning, he tossed the towel and reached into the pocket of his shorts, drawing her attention to the way the faded denim... *Keep your eyes above the belt, Abby.* Except he didn't have a belt, and the view above was just as dangerous. Neat little navel, tempting tanned skin... She looked up quickly and saw him slip on a pair of reading glasses.

As he skimmed the paper he raised an eyebrow and one corner of his mouth kicked up. 'Good Vibrations.'

Abby drew herself up to her full height. Just like a man to take it the wrong way. 'Do you find this funny, Mr Forrester? I assure you, I do not.'

He regarded her over his spectacles, all trace of humour gone. 'Nor do I. This building is a private residence. What kind of business is it exactly... it's *Miss* Seymour, I presume?'

'Yes.' Her hand moved towards her throat as a flush of heat crept up her neck, thanks to the redheads' Curse. 'What are you implying, *exactly*, Mr Forrester? My application was accepted. I have a signed lease to prove it.'

'Not signed by me,' he said over his specs.

'Oh...' She closed her eyes as the lump in her stomach rose to her throat. Was she really standing here letting a sexy stranger witness her business inexpertise?

When she opened them again she was still here and he was still watching her, only now he'd added sympathy and curiosity to the mix.

'I'm sorry, Miss Seymour, but you've been conned.' He tapped the signature with one large blunt finger. 'Not mine. This isn't worth spit. It's not even a legal document.'

If he'd used his hammer, the words couldn't have hit harder. *Not legal*. Her throat constricted. Where had the money for the bond and first three months' hard-earned rent gone? Anger pushed through the emotions swirling through her. 'I signed it in good faith, I *need* this place, and I need it now.'

'How did you find this property?' he said, his attention still focused on the paper in his hand.

'On the Internet. We handled most of the details by e-mail. I had no idea--'

'Obviously.'

She bristled at the know-it-all tone. *Obviously* Zachary Forrester was a lawyer, as well as a handyman. Which had her wondering... how much did lawyers charge?

She wished he'd just hand the paper back and let her go. But, no, he was still reading the fine print. *She* hadn't read the fine print. Who put fine print on an illegal lease anyhow?

Her fingers flexed and curled against her chest. She'd executed the whole deal on her own, not even asked for legal advice. *Stupid.* Aurora would have told her to check it out before putting down her hard-earned cash, and she'd have been right, but she'd wanted to surprise the woman who'd been mother, mentor and friend for the past ten years.

Since her stroke Aurora had been frail, and Abby was determined to find a place away from rural Victoria's cold, damp climate where she could live out her days in peace. And she'd fallen in love with the picture of the little house...

Now here she was in tropical Surfers Paradise with a phoney lease, a second-hand van of supplies and barely enough money to live on. Talk about Paradise Lost. The deal was also supposed to have included a small self-contained living area so she was now officially homeless, as we...

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